

Our nation's economy is going through a period of uncertainty. The credit crunch and housing slump have dampened economic growth. Gas prices are reaching an astonishing \$4 per gallon, and food prices are soaring. Americans are forced to cope with these rising prices every day.

On the brighter side, surging U.S exports continue to bolster our economy. Millions of U.S. jobs are dependent on trade. Without trade, many of these jobs would be lost. Open markets create new opportunities for U.S. producers to sell their products overseas. Since Americans can't eat all of the prunes, rice, nuts, beef, and other commodities grown in Northern California, trade is vital to our area's economic prosperity.

Record exports have played a critical role in preventing our economy from diving into recession. Without the growth in exports, our economy would have contracted in the first quarter of 2008. Importantly, exports to nations with which we have a free trade agreement (FTA), which removes unfair trade barriers, are growing faster than exports to non-FTA countries. Over 40% of our nation's exports go to our fourteen FTA partners, even though these countries make up only 7% of the world's economy. Because trade agreements bolster U.S. exports, I believe our nation should pursue more of them.

One pending agreement is with Colombia. Formerly one of the most dangerous countries in the world, Colombia under President Alvaro Uribe's leadership has been transformed by embracing democracy and open markets, and taking a hard line against terrorists and drug traffickers. Violence has fallen dramatically, and the economy is thriving. Colombia is now a strong American ally.

Currently, Colombian imports enter our nation mostly tariff free, but U.S. producers face stiff tariffs when exporting goods and services to Colombia. Northern California fruit, nut, vegetable, and dairy producers face this unfair trade barrier. The Colombia agreement would remove most of these tariffs, and level the playing field for U.S. farmers and small businesses. Our local economy stands to gain from this market-opening agreement.

Yet, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi recently took an unprecedented action to indefinitely delay consideration of this agreement. On its merits, the Colombia deal is the ultimate fair trade agreement and should pass by a strong bipartisan vote. Unfortunately, it was the victim of election-year politics. The obstruction of this win-win agreement was terrible news for U.S.

workers and the American economy.

I believe the benefits of trade are the best kept secret of our economy. While removing unfair trade barriers won't cure all of our economic struggles, it will foster job creation and economic growth here at home. Congress should reject economic isolationism and pass the Colombia FTA without further delay.